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CHAPTER 55

THE SYMBOLIC SIGNIFICANCE OF FOOD FROM THE FOREST AMONG THE KELABIT OF SARAWAK, EAST MALAYSIA

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INTRODUCTION

The Kelabit presently number about 5 000 (Ko, 1987) and speak a language that belongs to what has been called the Apo Duat group (Hudson, 1977). Their homeland is the plateau area at the headwaters of the Baram river. However, since the Second World War, many Kelabit have moved to coastal towns in Sarawak. The Kelabit Highlands form part of a large interior tableland (Schneeberger, 1979) and are about 1000 m above sea level.

The area inhabited by the Kelabit is isolated and difficult of access from the coast. Kelabit settlements are carved out of the rain forest. Within the area utilized by a community inhabiting a settlement, there are zones used for different purposes. These different zones may be seen as "tamed" to different degrees. The longhouse(s) inhabited by the settlement constitute the most profoundly tamed zone. Beyond this, conceptually, are the other areas utilized by the community, which are less and less under the control of humans. The Kelabit rely quite substantially on local natural resources. This is particularly true of those that live at some distance from the airstrip in Bario.

KELABIT AGRICULTURE

The Kelabit are successful cultivators of rice and – as do all tribes that grow rice in Sarawak (see, for example, Jensen, 1974, for the Iban) – they place great importance on their identity as rice-growers. They do cultivate other starch foods, including a number of root crops – taro, sweet potatoes,

cassava and some potatoes – and corn, millet and, in some communities, Job's tears and sorghum, plus a variety of other plants for their fruit or leaves. However, none of these is accorded the same importance as rice. It is the rice consumed at every meal which is thought to satisfy hunger and to truly nourish. Among the Kelabit, starch foods other than rice are eaten on their own, in a casual manner, as snacks. Some tribes in the area mix other starches with rice if the latter is scarce, but the Kelabit appear rarely, if ever, to have had to do this. Indeed, doing so is regarded as a matter for mockery and embarrassment. Besides arable farming, the Kelabit keep buffaloes, pigs and chickens, and in the past kept goats and deer.

Since the Second World War, wet rice cultivation has been adopted all over the Kelabit Highlands for reasons which have been discussed elsewhere (Janowski, 1988). Before this, it was limited to the marshy area around Bario; in other parts of the Kelabit Highlands dry swidden cultivation of rice was practised. Settlements outside Bario now practise both forms of cultivation. However, the type of wet cultivation has changed radically since the war. Traditional wet rice cultivation did not rely on extensive earth moving and was in fact a form of shifting cultivation. In contrast, the new form of wet cultivation involves the creation of permanent fields (Janowski, 1991: Chapter 3). According to the Kelabit, there is no private ownership of land in the Kelabit Highlands. Utilization of land creates a lien on it, but this, they say, is based on the fact that labour has been invested in the land. The significance of this appears to be that land used for a particular purpose once is easier to use again for that purpose. This applies particularly well to present-day permanent wet rice fields. Because a great deal of labour is nowadays invested in making them, there does appear to be *de facto* ownership of wet rice land.

FOOD FROM THE FOREST

Despite the fact that the Kelabit are agriculturalists, they rely quite heavily on wild foods from the forest. In outlying parts of the Kelabit Highlands, such as the community of Pa' Dalih where I did fieldwork in 1986-88, very little food is imported from town. However, even in Bario, a very large proportion of the plant foods eaten as side dishes at the rice meal are gathered by women in areas of secondary growth.

In Pa' Dalih, many wild plants, including the young shoots of palms, rotans, sago and other plants, ferns and mushrooms, are collected from areas of secondary growth, making up at least half of the plant food eaten together with rice at the rice meal. All of the meat and fish consumed at the rice meal on an everyday basis is hunted or fished by men in the primary or secondary forest. Domestic animals (pigs and buffaloes) are only slaughtered for the feasts called *irau* (Janowski, 1991).

Animals are hunted in both primary and secondary forest. The most important animals hunted are three varieties of deer – the sambar deer, the barking deer and the mousedeer – and the wild pig. Nevertheless, other species of mammals and birds may be taken on occasion. Hunting is often with the aid of dogs. Either guns or spears are used today, but the blowpipe was used in the past. Fishing is fairly important, although the small volume of water in the rivers in this area near the watershed means that fish are not very big. Last, but not least, the Kelabit make their own salt by boiling down brine from salt springs occurring throughout the highland area. These springs are located in the forest.

Hunting and fishing in the rivers is done by men and boys. Gathering is the province of women and girls, who also collect tiny fish and snails in wet rice fields.

The resources in the forest are available equally to all those who belong to a given community. The only exception is fruit trees; if the identity of the person who planted the tree is still remembered, that person, or his/her descendants, have prior right to the fruit. Secondary forest associated with a particular settlement can only be exploited by members of that settlement community. Primary forest, where it is close to a particular settlement, is considered to be mainly a resource available to members of that settlement. In between settlements, there is a clear dividing line, following a ridge or stream, which separates the primary forest areas of the two settlements. However, any traveller is free to avail himself of the resources of the forest, both secondary and primary, for his immediate needs.

THE HEARTH-GROUP AND THE LONGHOUSE COMMUNITY

Like many other peoples in Borneo, the Kelabit live in longhouses. A community normally consists of one or two longhouses with about 10 to 15 family groups, which I call hearth-groups because they are focused on the hearth itself (Janowski, 1991). The area now known as Bario is an exception to this. It is now the major population centre of the Kelabit Highlands, and it consists of eight longhouses of the size already mentioned. Before the war, the one longhouse in this area was known as Lam Bah, literally "in the wet rice fields". Bario grew to its present size following the Confrontation between Malaysia and Indonesia in the 1960s.

Longhouses are divided into two main areas: (1) the cooking and eating area (*dalim*), containing the hearth at which the rice meal is cooked, and (2) the area which may be termed the gallery (*tawa*). Nowadays, these areas are housed in separate parallel buildings. There are also small sleeping/storage rooms (*telong*). Each hearth-group builds and maintains a slice of the longhouse, including part of the *dalim* and part of the *tawa*.

A Kelabit hearth-group consists of one focal married couple, sometimes a subsidiary couple – their child plus child-in-law or parents/parents-in-law where these are elderly – and a number of unmarried young people and children, most of whom are real or adopted children and/or grandchildren of the focal couple. All married people with children may be described as *lun merar*, literally “big people”, equivalent to social adults, who take responsibility for others. However, the focal couple of a hearth-group are *the* “big people” of that hearth-group. They are “bigger” than the other couples within the hearth-group. The focal couple of a hearth-group is closely associated, within the longhouse, with the hearth itself. They spend most of their time by the hearth, leaving it much less often than junior members of the hearth-group. In the past, all married couples slept by their own hearth, while unmarried members of the hearth-group slept in the loft above the *dalim* (girls) or on the *tawa*’ (boys).

In their association with the growing of rice, with the rice meal and with the hearth, the “big people” of a hearth are contrasted with the junior, unmarried members of the hearth-group, the *anak adi*’, who are not associated with the production of rice and are not linked so tightly to the hearth itself. The young not only did not sleep by the hearth after the age of about twelve in the past, but they also, nowadays as well as in the past, often sleep away from the part of the longhouse built by their own hearth-group. During the day, they spend a good deal of time in other parts of the longhouse, socializing with their peers, sometimes returning only for meals.

The association of the “big people” with the hearth itself means that they are associated with the core of the longhouse apartment. The word *dalim* – referring to the part of the longhouse which contains the hearth – literally means “inside” as well as “deep” and “true”. The fact that the young people are not associated with the *dalim*, but rather with the periphery, particularly with the *tawa*’ (explicitly described as non-*dalim* by the Kelabits), distances them from the central core of the hearth-group.

RICE VERSUS FOODS WHICH “GROW ON THEIR OWN”

Food is conceptually separated into two types: on the one hand is rice; on the other hand are wild foods from the primary and secondary forest, plus cultivars other than rice. It is believed by the Kelabit (Lian-Saging and Bulan, 1989: 102) that rice is only able to grow with human help, and much attention is lavished on it. It needs careful physical care, and is weeded and assiduously guarded from animals. In order to succeed, the rice crop is believed to depend on the spiritual state of those who planted it. In the past and to some extent nowadays, this state is expressed in terms of the relationship with the pre-Christian deity Deraya,

associated with rice-growing and life in general. Now that the Kelabit have converted to Christianity, it is also phrased in terms of a good relationship with God, particularly with Jesus Christ. In contrast, crops other than rice are not cared for after they are planted; their success depends very little physically, and not at all spiritually, on human beings.

Rice is also differentiated from other crops in the way it is harvested and consumed. Rice is cultivated by the hearth-group. It is also harvested and consumed by the hearth-group, and is not freely shared. It is very explicitly owned. Although its cultivation is organized cooperatively, labour is carefully reciprocated between hearth-groups. Only on certain specific occasions is rice shared outside the hearth-group which cultivated it. Other crops, on the other hand – including both those eaten as snack foods and those prepared as side dishes at the rice meal – are freely shared in both their raw and cooked state. When cooked, however, side dishes for the rice meal are sent over to other hearth-groups before the rice meal itself, which is eaten separately by the different hearth-groups. Snack foods, however, are eaten together by members of different hearth-groups.

Crops other than rice, including vegetable foods eaten as side dishes at the rice meal, are treated as though they were closer to wild foods than to rice. The fact that they are treated as being able to grow on their own after planting brings them close to wild plants, which grow entirely without human help. The ownership of crops other than rice is very tenuous: they are freely shared, and the Kelabit are clear that there should be no need for repayment. In fact, there is a positive prescription to share them and not to sell them. In the same way, wild foods, both plant and animal, are freely shared and are not normally considered to belong to the person bringing them into the longhouse. Although certain varieties of fish that are much prized, and very occasionally the meat of the mousedeer, are sometimes sold, this is seen as being improper. There is an explicitly stated belief that wild foods should not be sold but should be given away. In contrast to the attitude towards wild foods and cultivars other than rice, rice is considered of value and saleable.

All members of a hearth-group spend time on hunting and gathering activities allocated on the basis of the gender. However, while the “big people” of a hearth-group are associated with rice-growing, young people without children are more closely associated with wild foods. A very large proportion, probably the majority, of wild foods are obtained by the young. In communities which still have easy access to the forest – like Pa’ Dalih – boys and young men spend a very large proportion of their time hunting, and girls in all communities spend a good deal of time gathering wild plants as well as harvesting cultivated ones.

RICE AND THE GENERATION OF ADULTHOOD

Both members of the conjugal pair around which a hearth-group is organized (i.e. its "big people") are seen as responsible for providing the rice meal for their dependents. They are also jointly responsible for the cultivation of rice, which is, on an everyday level, marked linguistically as the pivot of the rice meal. This meal is described as "eating rice" (*kuman nuba*).

It is this couple that makes decisions, particularly rice-growing decisions, for the hearth-group as a whole. This couple also assumes a large proportion of the work-load in the rice-fields. Younger couples belonging to the hearth-group will help them, but are under their direction.

Successful cultivation of rice confers adult status in Kelabit society. It is essential that the "big people" of a hearth-group succeed in producing enough rice to feed all their dependents within this unit. Should they be unable to do so, they lose status and may eventually be incapable of maintaining a separate hearth-group. This is so even if, for some time, the "big people" of other hearth-groups will provide them with rice, to the advantage of the giver and the disadvantage of the recipient in terms of status.

Just as the young are associated with the periphery and are not accorded the prominence that "big people" enjoy, so the foods with which they are associated – wild foods – tend, on an everyday basis, to be little emphasized. Their provision does not generate the status that rice-growing does. For example, little thanks is accorded to young men who invest enormous amounts of effort in hunting. Hunting and gathering activities may be described as *raut*, a word also used to describe the play of children.

THE EVERYDAY RICE MEAL AND THE LARGE-SCALE RICE MEAL (IRAU)

Rice may be consumed in a number of forms. In the past, wine made from rice (*borak*) was very important. Nowadays, however, rice wine is no longer made; the Kelabit believe it to be incompatible with Christianity, which they have adopted since the Second World War. The main context in which rice is eaten nowadays, and for which it is essential that enough rice be produced, is the rice meal (*kuman nuba*). This is eaten three times a day.

In contrast to snack foods, which are shared by members of different hearth-groups, rice meals are taken separately by the separate hearth-groups within a community. It is the separate consumption of rice which delineates the hearth-group; as has already been mentioned, it is only at meals that children and young people are certain to turn up at their own hearth.

Members of a hearth-group practically always eat their rice meals by their own hearth. Not only will they strongly resist eating rice belonging to another hearth-group, but they are extremely unwilling to even eat their own rice by another hearth-group's hearth. It is very important that rice meals be shared and eaten together at their own hearth by co-members of that hearth. This applies particularly to the morning and evening rice meals, when everyone in the longhouse, who is not away on a visit to another longhouse, or who is not spending the night at a field house, is present.

The rice meal is described as "eating rice", but it consists not of rice alone but of rice together with side dishes (*penguman*). These side dishes are made up of wild foods, including both wild vegetables and meat from wild hunted animals, plus cultivated vegetables. The most basic rice meal consists of rice with salt; salt may be considered a wild food derived from the forest (although it has always had an exchange value, unlike other wild foods). However, the significance of the rice meal, consisting not only of rice but also of wild foods, only becomes fully apparent at feasts (*irau*).

Not all rice meals are consumed on an everyday basis by the separate hearth-groups of a community. Much less frequent, but of great significance, are rice meals shared by larger groups of people, members of different hearth-groups. The group that shares larger-scale rice meals may be the longhouse community, the multi-longhouse community or, at feasts (*irau*), the entire Kelabit community. Large-scale rice meals are consumed communally by members of different hearth-groups, unlike everyday rice meals. Where they are not hosted by one particular hearth-group, they involve the pooling of rice by members of the hearth-groups participating. However, some large-scale rice meals are hosted by one hearth-group, and these involve, not pooling of rice, but the provision of rice by one host hearth-group. The most important of such hosted rice meals occurs at *irau* feasts.

Hosting the rice meal at *irau* accords high status to the "big people" of the hearth-group. This special rice meal brings into focus the nature of the rice meal as consisting of both rice and side dishes. While, at everyday rice meals, it is rice that is emphasized, at the rice meal at *irau* the food that accompanies rice is of equal significance to the rice, and it is provided by the host hearth-group. Again, whereas at rice meals consumed every day, side dishes are made from all sorts of plant and animal foods, at *irau* they consist only of meat from domestic animals – pigs and buffaloes. Such animals are considered very valuable and are sold for high prices. The animals are slaughtered publicly and, in the past, were killed ritually. Exactly how many animals were provided and what value they represented is discussed at length by the guests to the *irau*.

Although the animals killed at *irau* are domestic, they are considered to be associated with the forest, that is, with wild food. Of the animals slaughtered, pigs exist in the forest, buffaloes do not. It is pigs that are always, without fail, slaughtered at *irau*; buffaloes are an optional extra. Wild pigs are the most common, and most highly appreciated, wild animal hunted for meat in the forest. The Kelabit say that buffaloes were introduced in the area relatively recently. Before then, domesticated deer were used instead, and deer exist in the forest. Thus, there is no clearcut separation between the nature of domesticated and wild animals, except for the fact that domesticated animals have been invested with extra value. Meat from domesticated animals consumed at *irau* cannot be said to be something different in nature from wild meat eaten at everyday rice meals. However, it is accorded a value, expressed nowadays in monetary terms, which is denied to the wild meat eaten on an everyday basis.

THE RICE MEAL AS THE CORNERSTONE OF KELABIT SOCIETY

At everyday occasions, the provision of rice for the daily meal is the duty of the married couple central to the hearth-group, its "big people" (*lun merar*). They are, however, primarily associated with the provision of the rice rather than the side dishes.

At *irau* feasts, the obligatory rice meal is also associated with the "big people" of the host hearth-group. However, the association operates differently. Instead of husband and wife being associated, together, with the rice component of the meal, female is associated with rice and male with side dishes – with the meat. This is made quite explicit by the way in which the meal is prepared and served. Before the *irau* begins, the men of the community boil the meat outside the longhouse and the women cook and pack the rice inside the longhouse. At the *irau*, men distribute meat and fat, and women distribute rice, as well as the sweet drinks and crackers. These have replaced rice wine and a food made from rice, *senape*, which used to be distributed at *irau* in the past.

The Kelabit have been described as a "stratified" society (Rousseau, 1990: Chapter 7) with reason: they believe in a differential distribution of prestige (described as the quality of being *doo*, literally "good"), considered to be inherited. Prestige is based on the status of the social adult – "big person" – which is contingent upon the maintenance of a separate hearth-group through the provision of rice meals for dependents. The concept of "big person" does not only exist at the level of the hearth-group. The focal couple of the leading hearth-group of a longhouse community are also described as "big people" – the "big people" of the longhouse. Leaders of groups of longhouses are also described as "big people".

In all these senses, the status of "big person" is generated through the act of providing the rice meal for others. On everyday occasions, rice meals are shared only within the hearth-group, and serve to define its boundaries. At *irau* feasts, however, they are shared by much larger groups of people, and are provided by one couple. This couple may be said to present itself as the "big people" – the symbolic parents/grandparents, if one likes – of the entire group present. Leaders of the longhouse community, and of groups of longhouse communities, are described as the "big people" among those whom they lead. To attain the position of leader it is essential to hold successful, well-attended *irau*. It is through the holding of *irau* attended by large numbers of people that prestige is proclaimed – and, arguably, also generated, even though the Kelabit are reluctant to admit to this since they say that "good"-ness is inherited.

At such *irau*, all those attending share a rice meal. In so doing they present themselves as a higher hearth-group at a symbolic level. It is the sharing of *irau* that defines both kinship in its widest extension, and the social universe in which the Kelabit live. In fact, both may be said to be the same thing. They are defined on the same basis, the co-consumption of the rice meal, and may be said to be equivalent entities, from a symbolic point of view.

The hearth-group, then, may be said to be the basic building brick and the model in microcosm of society as the Kelabit visualize it. The rice meal which defines it, both the everyday rice meal and that at *irau* feasts, may be said to be the foundation on which the Kelabit vision of society is laid.

CONCLUSION: THE SYMBOLIC IMPORTANCE OF BOTH RICE AND WILD FOODS

irau are extremely important events. Nowadays, most *irau* are held shortly after the birth of the first child of a young couple, in order to bestow a name on the child, parental names on the parents and grandparental names on the grandparents. They are held by the focal couple of a hearth-group, who are the grandparents of the child being named. They are the most important occasion at which prestige is generated. All the Kelabit population are invited, and huge numbers of guests attend *irau* held by prestigious couples.

Thus, the fact that, at *irau*, the "wild" component of the meal is accorded prominence, is of considerable significance. *irau* makes clear that, despite the everyday emphasis on the rice component, at a fundamental level the "wild" is essential to the rice meal, and to the generation of prestige that takes place at it. Both rice and the foods eaten with it are essential to this rice meal.

At *irau* the rice meal, so to speak, is "unpacked". The fact that it consists of both rice and foods which are wild or treated as though they were wild, is made quite explicit, and these wild foods are reduced to an essential component – meat. Rather than being associated with the young, who are peripheral to the hearth-group and to the generation of prestige, the meat eaten at *irau* is associated with one half of the married couple, the male. Meat is thus central to the system and is equated with rice in significance.

The Kelabit see themselves as rice-growers. It is their achievement as successful cultivators of rice which they broadcast to the outside. However they rely heavily on other foods, both "true" wild foods and cultivated foods which they treat as though they were wild. This is not only true from a nutritional point of view. An analysis of the rice meal, particularly the extremely important rice meal held at *irau*, makes clear that wild foods, and foods treated as wild, are essential in the symbolic equation represented by the rice meal, which is at the very foundation of the Kelabit vision of society.

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CHAPTER 56

PANGIUM EDULE: A FOOD FOR THE SOCIAL BODY AMONG THE ANKAVE-ANGA OF PAPUA NEW GUINEA

Pascale BONNEMÈRE

INTRODUCTION

The Ankave-Anga live in the mountains at the far north of the Gulf province, in the eastern part of Papua New Guinea. Numbering about one thousand, they are spread unequally between three closed valleys which run in the direction of the Gulf of Papua on the west flank of the Kratke Range, a subsidiary range of the central cordillera. Their territory takes the form of a rough square about thirty kilometres across, 99% covered in tropical humid forest at an altitude of 600–2300 m. Although it varies widely from place to place, their population density never exceeds 3 people km⁻² and averages about 1 person km⁻², extremely low for Papua New Guinea and similar to demographic characteristics of hunter-gatherer societies.

The Ankave belong to a group of about 70 000 people collectively known as the Anga, who are divided into about twenty groups speaking twelve related languages and sharing many cultural characteristics. They are refugees who arrived in the area several hundred years ago after conflicts broke out in the original territory, around Menyamya (Figure 56.1). The members of each patrilineal clan took over a portion of present day Ankave territory by clearing the forest. Their descendants continue to open gardens in the same places at various altitudes; they hunt, use the available plant resources which either grow spontaneously or which were planted by their ancestors and set eel traps in the sections of rivers to which they have rights (see Lemonnier, 1993, this volume).

The villages and hamlets are established between 800 and 1400 m altitude and are small, the biggest only comprising about fifteen domestic enclosures. Each family owns a house in a village but they are rarely occupied for the whole year. For many activities (opening a new garden, making and setting eel traps, beating bark capes, preparing lime to be eaten